

# CRADLE suggests...

## *Academic integrity, assessment security and digital assessment*



### WHAT IS ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND ASSESSMENT SECURITY?

With a rapid shift to online learning, many educators have raised concerns about student cheating. Without face-to-face examinations, how can we verify that students have completed their own work, under the circumstances we have prescribed? These concerns raise issues related to academic integrity and assessment security. Academic integrity focuses on equipping learners with the capabilities and values necessary to conduct ethical scholarship. In contrast, assessment security focuses on hardening assessment against attempts to cheat, and on detecting any cheating that has occurred. Both are necessary to ensure that students who obtain university degrees have met the required outcomes.

### THE RESEARCH

The CRADLE team have conducted a range of projects on assessment security and academic integrity, including work on detecting contract cheating (including a [CRADLE Suggests resource](#)), the quality of contract cheated work, and the security of online examinations. The following advice comes from CRADLE research as well as other cited sources from the literature.



### Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning

CRADLE suggests is a series of briefings from the [Centre for Research and Assessment in Digital Learning \(CRADLE\)](#), which translates our own research into practice-based possibilities.

### PROMOTING INTEGRITY AND SECURING ASSESSMENT

#### **Don't assume digital assessment is less secure**

No assessment is immune to cheating. While in-person examinations are often thought of as more secure, recent large-scale survey research suggests that exams are the site of both more third-party cheating, and more undetected third-party cheating, than take-home written tasks (Harper, Bretag, & Rundle, 2020). The types of assignments students say they are least likely to cheat on are reflections on practicums, vivas, personalised and unique tasks, and in-class tasks (Bretag et al., 2019). Some of these are translatable into digital modes.

#### **Prioritise the security of high-stakes tasks that matter programmatically**

Securing every act of assessment is infeasible, and would likely compromise students' learning experience. When choosing which tasks to focus on, those that contribute to degree outcomes matter most. Where a learning outcome is assessed multiple times across a degree program, it is probably most important to secure the final assessment of that outcome. More resource-intensive approaches like vivas become more feasible where they are applied sparingly to programmatically important, high-stakes moments of assessment. Cheating should never be ignored, but for lower-stakes assessment it is more important to focus on building cultures of integrity and trust.

#### **Restrictions are harder to enforce remotely**

Exams usually rely on restrictions; for example, even open-book tasks still restrict the time students have, and their ability to talk with their peers. Consistent enforcement of restrictions is important to the fairness of assessment, but these can be more easily bypassed in take-home or digital exams (Dawson, 2016). Where it is not feasible to enforce restrictions, relaxing those restrictions might be fairer and more authentic to expectations of integrity in professional practice.

#### **Reconsider the need to assess low-level outcomes and tasks with one right answer**

Assessing recall of facts requires students to not have access to those facts. As discussed previously, restrictions are very difficult to enforce in digital modes. Similarly, tasks with 'one right answer' rely on restricting access to that answer or to potential collusion opportunities. While there are some circumstances where these types of assessment are essential, if it is possible to substitute them with tasks involving higher-level outcomes these may be vulnerable to fewer types of cheating.

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#### **Vivas might improve assessment security**

CRADLE recently conducted a study where we paid students to cheat in a viva. We have not tried to publish this study yet because the results look too good to be true: the Deakin sessional markers we employed were able to spot cheating, every time. We present this result with caution because we wish to replicate it before we publish it. But there may be some benefit to vivas or similar conversations with students about their work as a way to improve assessment security. This includes formal vivas, conversations over Zoom about an assignment a student has submitted, or teacher-student interactions that are integrated throughout the task.

#### **Talk with teaching teams about cheating and integrity in digital assessment**

Panicking about cheating in digital assessment is unproductive and not based in evidence. However, it is worthwhile having a think and a chat about the different ways that integrity can be promoted online, and the types of cheating to look out for. CRADLE research has repeatedly found that being alerted to the possibility of cheating is one of the most effective interventions available at increasing detection rates (e.g. Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2018, 2019).

#### **Talk with students about the dangers of cheating**

In addition to the usual academic integrity conversations you might have, students also need to know about the risks to themselves of cheating. Assignments bought online are often poor quality, with one CRADLE study finding most purchased assignments were not even of pass quality (Sutherland-Smith & Dullaghan, 2019). Universities take cheating very seriously, and penalties can include exclusion. Even worse, students are sometimes blackmailed by cheating services (Yorke, Sefcik, & Veeran-Colton, 2020). These and other potential harms may act as a strong disincentive against cheating.

### FIND MORE

For more information about detecting contract cheating, take a look at our [CRADLE suggests... 'How to detect contract cheating'](#) one-page guide.

1. Bretag, T., Harper, R., Burton, M., Ellis, C., Newton, P., van Haeringen, K., . . . Rozenberg, P. (2019). [Contract cheating and assessment design: exploring the relationship](#). *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(5), 676-691.
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7. Yorke, J., Sefcik, L., & Veeran-Colton, T. (2020). [Contract cheating and blackmail: a risky business?](#) *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-14.

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